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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

ADVENTURES IN MOTLEY¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

It was fundamental in Edward Raynes that he was bent upon maintaining, inflexibly and incorruptibly, an attitude of ironical detachment toward life. When he read, for instance, it was through a telescope that he regarded his author, with the other eye significantly closed. It was his way to keep genius at a distance. Henry James, to be sure, suited him very well indeed, "for he gave Edward's brain the kind of movement that he found most acceptable"; but never with any of his authors did he allow himself to become personally involved—not even with Henry James; and that this was an extraordinary triumph, Edward could have pointed out to you: for has any other author possessed so remarkably the trick of personally involving his adherents?

Edward, you perceive, besides being an incurable satirist, was almost unbelievably modern: for even modernity was a little *vieux jeu* for him. He wanted to read some one who was not perpetually conscious of his period, who did not seek to impress him as speaking with the latest possible speech; who did not go in for "contemporary social forces." He was particularly annoyed, in a certain type of fiction, by such words as "perdurable" and "emprise," and such phrases as "her whom he thus happened on." As for Mr. Chesterton—poor, dear, harmless Mr. Chesterton!—he was only "a curious and rather notable freak," who contrived to simulate brilliancy of statement by the ingenuous expedient of observing, for example, that "A spittoon is just as much at the heart of the Universe as the

¹ *The Buffoon*, by Louis U. Wilkinson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916.

Milky Way," thus gaining an enormous reputation for originality, though he was at bottom inordinately respectable. But even toward those whom Edward found especially attractive, he tempered his enthusiasm with raillery, "so as to be able to support it without wincing." Temperamentally he was against all reform: the emancipation of labor, of the poor, of women, of the lower races; the curtailment of privilege; democracy—all this was abhorrent to him; yet intellectually he was converted at every point to the most enlightened liberalism, though modern propagandist writing bored him.

Being a Cambridge man (as he pointed out to his Aunt Amelia), he lacked "the art of being frivolous and wise at the same time"—we Cambridge men never, he observed, "really attain to that." He was an intellectual *farceur*, repelling emotional exactions as an Imagist poet repels subjective sentiment. The tormenting imp of farce that inhabited his brain was ineradicable, yet vaguely irritating. All contacts of whatever kind "shook his cap and bells," and in time he began to see dimly that he obeyed a control not wholly within his own field of government—"his pantaloons impulses and grotesque ribald stirs jerked him about on their strings, making him feel uncomfortably a manikin now and then."

But, as a general thing, Edward did not disconcert himself by a too-curious introspection. The Calvinistic morality of a forgotten day would have said that he played with life; but his case was hardly so simple as that. He would have delighted that indefatigable collector of strange spiritual anatomies who created the Perfect Egoist. But unlike the superlative Meredithian original, he was a self-conscious egoist, with a delicately sadistic sense of comedy. We see him as under the entomologist's indecent and dreadful lens in this unsparing exhibition by his creator: "He lived in fear of the personal indignities which invade us always along with the intense sensations that come of going far, whether in thought or in emotion." Such as he "cling to a surface made as secure and as habitable as possible, while they make fools, when they can, of others, in order to cover their own terror of the motley. Again, they will inoculate themselves with a prophylactic mild dilution of recognized absurdity, will cultivate certain whims and foibles to throw off ridicule that would otherwise strike

too deep. By an irony almost tragic these men end in being the most completely tricked by whatever cosmic spirit there is; themselves the buffoons who have lost most."

Normally, Edward's existence was smoothly, pleasantly, and meticulously conducted. Nice adjustments, exact completions, symmetrical roundings-off, were essential to his well-being. He kept watch over surplus half-sheets of note-paper; he refused to eat honey at breakfast when some one else was drinking ale (though why even an Englishman should want to drink ale at breakfast is, happily, one of the few negligible problems of these congested times). That Edward was an artist in his cyrenaicism is made clear by the loving notation of his chronicler, who records not only his use of a hot-water bottle however warm the weather, but his carefulness in not washing his hands while taking his cold bath, for fear of the resultant distraction—an example of the *finesse* of epicureanism which fills us with envious admiration. Indeed, our only misgiving as to the exquisiteness of Edward's hedonism is caused by the knowledge that he waxed his moustache.

His spiritual downfall began abruptly—almost as abruptly as did Victor Radnor's, when, crossing London Bridge, he slipped upon that classic bit of orange-peel. With the implement of Edward's defeat (which, unlike Victor Radnor's, pointed his way to a new birth)—with this implement, Edward's creator plays as Meredith played with Victor's orange-peel. The instrument of defeat was a beautiful Divinity who wore Futurist dresses, and whose name was Eunice Dinwiddie. Her American friends called her "Eunus," which was an intolerable grief to her, though she had almost succeeded in persuading them to pronounce her name in three syllables. Eunice was adequately tall for her epicene figure (we learn later, in a moment of more confiding exposition, that she also had "epicene knees": a characterization which is, to our mind, inadequately pictorial). Draped in flowing gray, she suggested entrancingly an effect of blown mist, and her small head "was made to be held tenderly and savagely between a lover's hands." Her features, save for an "insufficient" nose, were Greek, connoting a hamadryad. She was, as Edward saw, a posthumous child of Oscar Wilde and Rossetti, but not wholly, after all, of the 'eighties, for she was timeless and eternal,

belonging to no period . . . these "art-circle women" were always the same, thought Edward: "they reacted in the same way from the influence of quite different men; their parasitism did not vary in expression." Edward's encounters with this delectable lady, his ravishment by her, and his eventual discomfiture, are quite wonderfully chronicled for us—with crafty and lethal wit, with incomparable malice.

Edward met her at Raoul Root's, for it was over Root's circle that the Divinity ruled; and it was there that she addressed to him her first remark: "What beautiful thing," she asked, "have you been doing? . . . Later, come to me where I sit, and you shall tell me your beautiful dreams." But this, surely, was flagrantly of the 'eighties and of Oscar, after all; and you wonder what Raoul Root and his circle must have thought of their epicene Divinity and her strangely anachronistic style. For Raoul and his brother poets represented a reaction even from Shaw and Wells; and as for the 'eighties and 'nineties, why, "that is an obsolete period—all the nineteenth century is obsolete: it produced nothing but prettiness and bombast." No: Raoul and his friends were *les jeunes*—"the last word in modernity: *les seuls jeunes authentiques*." They wrote poetry that read like advertisements; for Root said that "everything should come in: bathroom fixtures should come in, motor busses, telephone wires,—everything." In their verse there were no rhymes, of course; and no "metronome rhythms." . . . As for Root himself, and his circle, they were all very casual, very off-hand—"damned rude, in fact, at times." . . . They had "a pedantic and hide-bound convention of naturalness. *Les jeunes* must be natural. And *les jeunes* must be clever and bright. Seriousness is nineteenth century: *les jeunes* are to inaugurate a new era of wit. But they have no humor. They are deliciously simple . . ." All of which is unsurpassable in its marksman-ship. That it has been read with no interest whatever by that entertaining and naïve soul, Mr. Ezra Pound, we can easily believe.

After his fateful evening at Raoul Root's, Edward, no longer serenely detached, called upon Eunice, experienced mental and physical devastation as they embraced, and afterward talked to her frankly, with determined liberalism, of the delusive pacifications of sex, and of its ideal

co-operations. It is tragically recorded, however, that Eunice failed to understand. Later, we find Edward doubting horribly whether she would ever get further than "the very Victorian notion that he labored lovingly to raise and expand her spirit, with the end in view of beautiful vague gains to both of them—to her through him, to him through her, wrought upon and perfected. . . . All the old satin assonances!" The truth, of course, was that Edward, as he dreamed of union with her, aimed at "a sport of souls, a sport as little as possible shadowed by motive, but colored provocatively and ambiguously with intimations of all sorts of chance results . . . a sport entirely in Nature's line."

In what manner our hero was brought low—in what manner the Divinity became that treacherous bit of orange-peel—we do not feel called upon to divulge. That, as a proved buffoon, Edward was perhaps a genuinely tragic figure, was, he told himself, something that he might hope. But, even though he had worn inveterately his grinning mask,—though he had played the buffoon at every step, "with love, with companionship, with art, with intellectual and sensual toys, with every kind of conduct and of thought,"—was he perfectly a buffoon, after all? For he was a buffoon without true abandonment, and it was always abandonment that gave to a buffoon the authentic hue of tragedy.

His rebirth came as the sequel to a mortal incident, when he realized that peace—escape from the futilities and degradations of a buffoonery worn threadbare and insufficient—was to be sought in unsuspected ways. You leave him wrapped in the sudden memory of a dawn he had once seen after a night journey in France—a dawn breaking over flat pastures and straight trees: a dawn "misty-blue and occult, that did not creep, but came up out of the east on slow wings. . . ."

Our idea of the nearest approach to a white blackbird is a book-publisher with a controlling artistic conscience. Perhaps we are mistaken in thinking that Mr. Alfred A. Knopf is one of those prodigious and anomalous beings; but, if so, we shall remind ourselves that certain errors are pleasant to harbor, so long as one may continue to entertain them in good countenance. At all events, we suspect that, in Mr. Knopf's case, publishing books is chiefly an ex-

hilarating æsthetic adventure; otherwise it is quite certain that he would never have put forth this first novel of Mr. Wilkinson's, *The Buffoon*: for he cannot have expected that it would bring him either of the desired rewards of the publisher's profession: either profit or publicity. The exceeding candor of Mr. Wilkinson's narrative is too unpalatably ironic and too astringently intellectual to attract either the general notice of the coprophilous or the stupid malignity of Societies for the Suppression of Vice; and its subtlety as spiritual history will indispose all but the most inquisitive. It is a book that will forever repel and bore the multitude; for it is blistering in its affront to sentimentalism, and it is compounded almost wholly of brain-stuff. In recent fiction we can think of nothing in English to measure it against, for satirical deadliness, save the transcendent *Boon* of Mr. Wells. The author of *The Buffoon* has not the amplitude and the energy of that surprising genius; but he is subtler, more acid, more delicately ferocious.

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